

Expanding Early Learning Consultation

Response Form Part One, Question #4

Submitted by the

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AUGUST 4th 2008

Introduction

This document is submitted in response to the invitation of the Early Learning Agency to comment on what we believe to be the most important factors to be considered in the expansion of early learning programs in BC. The BC Aboriginal Child Care Society (BC ACCS) welcomes the opportunity to provide early input into this new policy initiative because we have always promoted meaningful consultation with Aboriginal communities in the development of new programming initiatives, as well as inter-Ministerial and inter-Governmental collaboration in the introduction of new programs.

BC ACCS is a federally-registered charity and provincially-registered non-profit society that helped 58 Aboriginal communities in British Columbia to create more than 800 child care spaces between 1995 and 1999 through the Federally-funded First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative (FNICCI). Through our research, advocacy, and program development capacities, we support Aboriginal communities and early learning and child care programs and personnel in British Columbia to develop and maintain culturally and linguistically rich early childhood experiences for Indigenous children and families.

We wish to acknowledge and thank the Early Learning Agency and the Ministry of Education for making opportunities available to provide input into the BC Early Learning Framework (BC ELF) and the proposed expansion of early learning programs in BC. We also wish to express our appreciation for the level of responsiveness that the Ministry has demonstrated on our input into BC ELF. We look forward to ongoing collaboration with the Early Learning Agency in the design and implementation of the programs under consideration to ensure that the implementation of these new early learning programs addresses the concerns expressed by Aboriginal communities and meets the needs of Aboriginal children and families.

The comments contained within this submission are drawn primarily from the knowledge and expertise we have gained through our experience providing and/or supporting early childhood development, care, early learning and special needs

programs, services, resources and professional development in BC Aboriginal communities.

- 1. The initiative should support the expansion of existing and new Aboriginal Early Learning Programs that Aboriginal communities have developed to meet their unique needs, not simply create new school-based Pre-Kindergarten Programs focused primarily on school-readiness.**

In the preparation of these comments, we have reviewed some of the available literature but have noted the relative dearth of materials reflecting Canadian programs, which is a reflection of the fact that, although there are many well-established American programs for 3 and 4 year-olds, there are relatively few such programs in the Canadian context. Available information suggests that Canada lags significantly behind Nordic and European countries, and even American States, in the provision of universal, affordable early learning programs for children 3 to 5 years of age.

Although there may not be a lot of Canadian research evidence, there is significant local, First Nations and public school experience and expertise in the delivery of school-based early learning programs in kindergarten settings. Some First Nations communities throughout the province of BC have long provided full-day kindergarten programs for children 5 years of age through their on-reserve schools; some First Nations communities also provide kindergarten programs for 4 year-olds. Full-day kindergarten programs for 5 year-olds are also currently available to some Aboriginal children through public schools off-reserve that access funding made available by the Ministry of Education to support especially vulnerable children. These schools can, therefore, be sources of expertise and experience in the expansion of school-based pre-kindergarten programs to a wider population.

Although ACCS appreciates that the Government of BC will be making new financial resources available for early learning programs, we have some misgivings about the apparent “school readiness” and “school-based” focus. As a result of these concerns, we intend to proceed with caution with respect to the endorsement of this new initiative. On the one hand, ACCS welcomes Early Learning Agency’s initiative to expand early learning opportunities for children 3 to 5 years of age because we have long believed in the positive impact that high quality early childhood programs can have in promoting the healthy holistic development of Aboriginal children, especially those in especially difficult or challenging circumstances as a result of family poverty and/or other conditions of risk. Existing resources need to be enhanced because, currently, early learning opportunities are not universally available to our children. On the other hand, however, we have some serious concerns about how the Ministry intends to make these new early learning resources available. We wish to stress, at the outset, that these enhanced resources must be available to support children and their families in a variety of early learning settings, rather than primarily or solely through school-based pre-kindergarten programs.

Although the available research evidence suggests that there are benefits to school-based pre-kindergarten programs, these findings must be accepted with caution in the context of Aboriginal children because, as is the case with most early childhood research, programs arising from such research are normed on populations other than

Aboriginal children, i.e., primarily “English-speaking children, living in the unique socio-historical and economic environment of the United States”¹.

While available research evidence can be helpful, the unique circumstances, needs and rights of Aboriginal children must be the primary determinants of enhanced early learning opportunities offered to Aboriginal children, families and communities. These unique circumstances include the continuing impact of historical issues such as the residential school system (which remains unresolved despite the recent formal Federal Government apology), and ongoing contemporary issues, including the fact that the gaps in indicators of Aboriginal child well-being have not been closed because of inadequate investment into both ECD programming and “upstream” interventions.

We are very concerned about the too early incorporation of our children into the formal school system – especially given the relatively poor performance of the formal school system, as evidenced by continuing disparities in performance and graduation rates and the apparent inability of schools to meet the needs of children with additional support needs, i.e., “special needs”. Most schools are not very child-friendly places, and school environments are recognized as very challenging for children. For example, the literature suggests that school-age children are “expected to co-operate with others, share equipment, follow rules, take turns and be considerate of others...encouraged to take care of themselves and their belongings...to keep themselves safe” and “motivated to use new words, to express themselves...to listen and comment on stories and ideas...”² Schools are also challenged by increasing levels of school-yard bullying, other aggressive and/or abusive behaviours and violence.

School readiness skills are promoted as a means of preparing very young children for these challenging environments. According to the literature, children can make more successful transitions from the early years to these more challenging environments through the early acquisition of social skills. Pre-kindergarten or other early learning programs that stress school readiness assist young children with this transition through participation in formal programs that provide them with more challenging experiences and more complex relationships. The literature suggests that social skills are the most important indicator of school readiness because of the very challenging nature of the school environment. Social skills help children make successful transitions by building their self-confidence, independence and sense of self-efficacy; i.e., helping children to be “confident enough to solve their own conflicts, ask questions of adults that they don't know, work independently as well as co-operatively with others, and make new friends”.³

However, these social skills are as culture-bound as most other aspects of the education system and this particular literature doesn't recognize that there are actually innovative initiatives in other jurisdictions to try to make primary school environments more like early childhood education because ECD is recognized as being more child-friendly, more conducive to learning, more supportive of children's mental health, and with better developmental outcomes for children.

¹ “Global Children in the Shadow of the Global Child” by Alan Pence and Hollie Hix-Small.

² One World Children's Centre *ibid.*

³ One World Children's Centre *ibid.*

In addition to our concerns about the initiative's apparent privileging of school-based, school-readiness focused pre-kindergarten programs; we are also extremely concerned about the absence of a clear commitment to supporting children's holistic development, rather than a more narrow focus on enhanced school readiness. While school readiness is an important developmental domain, it is not more important than the other developmental domains which make up a holistic development approach, i.e., cognitive (mind), physical (body), emotion (mind/body), spiritual (spirit), social, cultural, linguistic, aesthetic, creative and artistic development and environmental/ecological awareness.

Formal early childhood care, development and early learning programs in BC Aboriginal communities are relatively new – most are less than 10 years old – and are not universally available. Most small, remote, northern and coastal Aboriginal communities do not have access to formal ECD programs. Where programs exist, they struggle to ensure adequate and sustained funding, stable enrolments, accessible pre-service and in-service professional development opportunities, culturally and linguistically enriched programming, and the capacity to serve children with additional support needs (i.e., special needs); staff recruitment and retention is also a major issue, primarily because of the lack of social value of the sector and low compensation rates. A large part of the public policy advocacy work undertaken by BC ACCS has been for the purpose of trying to increase the social value of caring for children, enhancing investment levels and stabilizing the sector.

Since the 2005 consultations on the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Early Learning and Child Care Agreements (which were subsequently cancelled due to the election of a new Federal Government), we have been guided by the philosophy of our Elders and Grand Chief Edward John that, in addition to formal, centre-based programs, "Every home should be a child development centre". Thus, we support Aboriginal communities to provide a range of child care, development, early learning and special needs options, including home visiting, parent education, family support, maternal and infant health care, culture and language enrichment (language and culture nests), culture-based speech and language resources, Aboriginal infant development, Aboriginal supported child care, FASD prevention and support, parent/child drop-in programs, family resource centres, and the use of culturally-safe assessment and monitoring tools, as well as family-based and centre-based child care with integrated early learning programming. We also provide professional development / training, library and "e-resources" and public policy advocacy and we support the provision of direct benefits to children and families.

We believe very strongly that the enhanced early learning resources must be made available to Aboriginal communities on an equitable basis to support the range of early learning options that communities have created to meet their unique needs.

We look forward to finding out, from the Early Learning Agency, the level of funding that has been specifically targeted for the development of Aboriginal early learning initiatives, and we hope that such funding reflects the need to address the inequities in developmental outcomes for Aboriginal children. Because of the continuing gaps in life chances for Aboriginal children, a simple per capita allocation will not reflect an equitable share of the available resources; rather, investment decisions must reflect the need to invest at higher levels in Aboriginal communities, according to priorities

determined by Aboriginal communities, to close the gaps in developmental outcomes and life chances.

2. The creation of new, universally-available and free Early Learning Programs should support, not compete with and/or displace existing Aboriginal early childhood care, development and learning programs.

As noted in our written submission on the Draft BC Early Learning Framework (BC ELF), BC ACCS endorses and supports the expansion of early learning programs for children 3 to 5 years of age, subject to the concerns that we have identified in this document. These programs should be universally available to all BC children in that age group, including children with additional support needs (i.e., special needs children), and free (i.e., provided without charges of any kind). New school-based pre-kindergarten programs should also not compete or displace the existing Aboriginal early childhood care, development and early learning programs that Aboriginal communities have created to respond to their unique needs. The universal availability of at least 20 hours per week of free, universally-available early learning programs through the school system should not make existing Aboriginal child care centres, who may depend on parent fees as essential revenue, financially unviable.

While locating new early learning programs through local schools may seem to be a simple solution, if the schools have the necessary facilities, space, administrative systems, etc., there are implications for children, parents/families, existing service providers and communities which must be carefully considered. In all cases, the best interests of the child must be the paramount consideration. To prevent stress and possible trauma for children by disrupting their established relationships with caregivers, and the disruption of existing services which would have implications for communities as well as for the service providers, early learning experiences should be offered to children to enrich the programs they are already attending; program operating budgets should be maintained, even if parents/families are now provided with free part-day or full-day services. Existing child care services should not have to be converted to before and after school programs only. Regardless of where the services are located, i.e., school or community, children requiring both “care” and “early learning/education” should be served through “seamless day” programs; i.e., children should not have to be transported between care and learning programs.

Consistent with the research⁴, in addition to delivery through the school system as “pre-kindergarten” programs, ACCS supports the delivery of these new early learning programs through a “wide variety of settings including publicly and privately operated pre-schools, nursery schools, faith-based pre-schools, parent cooperative pre-schools, Montessori programs, licensed group child care programs, licensed family child care programs, and special needs centres”.⁵

⁴ Including the review of research findings reported by Hillel Goelman in his September 05, 2007 article in the Vancouver Sun; Hillel Goelman is the Director of the CHILD Project and a senior scholar at the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP), University of British Columbia

⁵ Goelman, *ibid.*

3. School-located pre-kindergarten programs may not be appropriate for 3 year-olds.

Although school-located pre-kindergarten programs are only one delivery option and all options should be supported, there may be some benefits to the school-based approach, particularly for families with older siblings already enrolled in the school. Although we noted in our previous submission on BC ELF that “in the same way that kindergarten programs were made universally available to children five years of age, through the public school system, universally available pre-school programs for children 3 and 4 years of age should also be provided through the school system”⁶, we are concerned with the inclusion of 3 year-olds in such school-based pre-kindergarten programs because of the increased vulnerability of this population, their needs for higher staff/student ratios and for programming that reflects early childhood values, principles and practices. Many Aboriginal families may also be reluctant to send their three year-olds to a school-based program because of lingering issues arising from the abuses of the residential school system. We believe that 3 year-olds are best served in early childhood settings and that most Aboriginal parents/families and communities would prefer to provide early learning experiences to three year-olds through family-based and/or community-based early childhood development, care and early learning programs to ensure that the early years approach and environment is preserved and enhanced for this population of young children.

4. There are benefits to school-based pre-kindergarten programs, but such benefits are not greater than those available through the range of early learning options.

Kindergarten subjects have been identified as inclusive of “reading and language arts, math, social studies, science, health, physical education, art, music, environmental education, and computer literacy.”⁷

Literature on Kindergarten programs for children 3 to 5 years of age suggests that school readiness is the main purpose of such programs; i.e., they help to prepare children for the transition to primary school, and as such, are “an important year” in the child’s development⁸.

The literature suggests that work on developing school readiness skills is best started at three years of age. Identified school readiness skills include: raising the child’s awareness of school; supporting the development of problem-solving skills and providing opportunities for children to use and master these skills; and facilitating the attachment of children to schools and lifelong learning by making learning “enjoyable and fun”,⁹ Programs that promote school readiness provide opportunities for children “to develop confidence and self-esteem, to practice creative problem solving skills, to be independent and make choices, to communicate effectively, and work co-operatively with others”; programs also promote children’s interests in pre-math and pre-language skills.¹⁰

⁶ BC ACCS submission to the Ministry of Education on the Draft BC Early Learning Framework (BC ELF) 2007.

⁷ “Early Childhood Guiding Practices” Department of Public Instruction, Madison, WI.

⁸ One World Children’s Centre, *ibid*.

⁹ One World Children’s Centre *ibid*.

¹⁰ One World Children’s Centre *ibid*.

In the Canadian context, it has been suggested by UBC researchers that “children’s participation in high quality pre-school, child care or pre-kindergarten programs” is a “major factor” making a significant difference in the healthy development of child.¹¹ Programs for children three to four years of age are “play-based, discovery-oriented programs” that “facilitate and stimulate children’s learning in age-appropriate early childhood settings by drawing upon their strengths, curiosity and interests”. Successful programs “acknowledge that parents are children’s first and best teachers’ and work “in partnership with families to support and complement parenting roles”.¹² We believe that the recommendations that are included in this submission are consistent with this local research.

5. Partnerships with parents/families and “shared parenting”.

Programs should build partnerships and “shared parenting” arrangements with parents/families in the care and education of their children, recognizing that parents/families are the first educators of their children and retain primary responsibility for their care and education, and to build on the already existing level of caregiving/parenting that community and school-based programs provide for children ages 5 to 12 years.

In many families and communities, to a significant extent, early childhood care, development and early learning programs have already largely replaced the traditional role of Aboriginal grandparents/Elders for a variety of reasons, including the declining health of grandparents/Elders, and the increased participation of grandparents/Elders in employment, employment training and post-secondary education, as well as their on-going participation in traditional economies.¹³ The care-giving environment has also become more complex, especially for children with additional support needs (i.e., special needs), further challenging our grandparents/Elders who have traditionally been the primary care-givers of children in Aboriginal communities.

The expansion of early learning programming, including the creation of part-day and full-day school-based pre-kindergarten programs even just for four year-olds, would increase the amount of caregiving provided by service providers and/or educators, thereby making partnerships with parents/families essential. Because parents/families retain primary responsibility for the education and care of their young children, it is essential that they have adequate input and involvement in the programming offered to facilitate their child’s early learning and holistic development.

Early learning programs, especially where such programs are offered on a full-day and/or “seamless day” basis, provide many opportunities to support the child’s healthy, holistic development. These opportunities are particularly important to the significant numbers of Aboriginal children 3 to 5 years who may lack access to such developmental supports because of family poverty and/or other risks in their developmental environments. Program personnel may need to help parents/families to articulate the particular images of the child that are relevant to their family and cultural context, and the visions that they have for their child’s healthy, holistic development. It is the role of

¹¹ Goelman, *ibid.*.

¹² Goelman, *ibid.*

¹³ Deanna Leon-Cook, BC Board of Directors, 2007, in comments made to the 2007 ACCS Annual Provincial Training Conference.

caregivers/early educators to honour those particular images of the child and to assist parents/families to achieve their identified visions for their children through a shared consensus on the values that will guide their caregiving and teaching practices and activities.

6. Early learning experiences offered to Aboriginal children and families must be consistent with the human rights of Indigenous children under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Early Learning Agency should ensure that the enhancement of early learning programs in BC, particularly the creation of school-based pre-kindergarten programs for 3 to 5 year-olds, is consistent with the human rights of Aboriginal children, especially with respect to Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which recognizes the right of children of minority communities and Indigenous populations to enjoy their own culture and to practise their own language and spiritual/religious traditions.

7. Early learning programs must be voluntary / non-compulsory and high quality.

Participation in the new early learning experiences should be encouraged and supported, but non-compulsory for 3 to 5 year-olds. Regardless of the delivery setting, for maximum impact, the new early learning programs must be voluntary/non-compulsory, and families should have the option of part-day (20 hours per week) or full-day programs. In every case, “learning” must be integrated into existing and newly created “care” and “development” programs. Programs should have a low teacher/student ratio and classes should be small. Teaching staff must be qualified to teach in the early childhood environment; i.e., personnel teaching children 3 to 5 years of age must be qualified early childhood instructors; teachers’ assistants must also have the appropriate early childhood qualifications.

8. Enhanced early learning programs must be delivered through a wide variety of settings, including community-based services and schools.

Consistent with research findings, early learning programs can be successfully delivered in a wide variety of settings, in addition to schools, including “publicly and privately operated pre-schools, nursery schools, faith-based pre-schools, parent cooperative pre-schools, Montessori programs, licensed group child care programs, licensed family child care programs, and special needs centres”.¹⁴ School-based pre-kindergarten programs should be limited to four and five year-olds. School-located programs may help to increase the school readiness of children through early exposure to the school and formal learning environment; however, the other developmental domains in a holistic model must also be supported. Benefits of pre-kindergarten programs located within the education system involves the higher social status and compensation of teaching personnel; i.e., school-based teachers tend to be more highly regarded and respected in the socio-cultural context of Canadian society and pre-kindergarten teachers would likely be compensated at rates higher than those available in the child care and ECD service delivery system. The combination of enhanced social status and increased compensation may facilitate the recruitment and retention of staff for pre-kindergarten programs.

¹⁴ Goelman, *ibid.*

Consideration should be given to ensuring that the staff of community early childhood care, development and early learning are on par with that of school-based staff. Where pre-kindergarten programs are school-located, because of the potential risks associated with the school environment (i.e., the potential for increased exposure to bullying and other forms of aggression) child safety must be ensured. The physical facilities, equipment and materials used in school-based early learning programs must be adequate and able to support the early year's curricula and environment required to support the child's holistic development.

9. Enhanced early learning programs must be universally available and accessible.

Enhanced early learning programs should be available and accessible to all First Nations, Inuit and Métis children in the province, regardless of residence (i.e., location on-reserve or off-reserve) or the child's needs for additional support (i.e., special needs). Programs should be offered without any cost to families, as part of the community-based service delivery and/or education system, and should provide a minimum of 20 hours per week of programming.

10. Enhanced early learning programs must follow consultation and consensus-building with BC Aboriginal communities.

All BC First Nations, other Aboriginal communities (i.e., Métis) and/or populations (i.e., Inuit) should be consulted and involved to achieve consensus on the design of the curricula, instructional methods and physical facilities (including indoor and outdoor play/learning equipment and materials) to be offered to their children and families through the enhanced early learning programs.

11. Enhanced early learning programs must be holistic, comprehensive and supportive of the child's culture and language.

Although the proposed early learning programs would definitely support enhanced school readiness, this must not be the single or even most important purpose of these new programs: all developmental domains must be equally important and supported to ensure the healthy, holistic development of the child. The right of Aboriginal children to spiritual development must be honoured on a basis equal to their rights to physical, cognitive, social, emotional, cultural, linguistic and other forms of holistic development. Where such programs are delivered as pre-kindergarten programs through the public, private or First Nations school system, the division of "church and state" cannot interfere with the Aboriginal child's right to enjoy and practice their own culture, language and spiritual beliefs and traditions.

Regardless of whether the enhanced early learning programs are located in schools or in community settings, they should be part of a comprehensive approach that also supports the healthy development of infants and toddlers (birth to 3 years), healthy pregnancies, safe births and the healthy development of pre-pubescent girls (i.e., pre-conception health): a "life cycle" approach to healthy early childhood development, such as the model under development by Carrier Sekani Family Services, would provide an effective model for a comprehensive approach.

Although we believe in the research, some of which is cited in the Early Learning Agency Consultation paper and in the BC Early Learning Framework, that has validated the importance of early learning programs, as noted previously, we are also very aware that the research evidence supporting school-based pre-kindergarten programs is as culture-bound as other ECD research findings, given that the results are based upon research on child populations other than Aboriginal children, primarily “English-speaking children, living in the unique socio-historical and economic environment of the United States”¹⁵; We also remain concerned that, despite the language in the consultation document recognizing the value of holistic development approaches, the initiative tends to privilege “school readiness” goals, within the context of one of BC’s “Great Goals” to become the best educated and most literate jurisdiction on the continent.

We remain committed to promoting the holistic development of our children, within the context of our children’s internationally-recognized rights to enjoy and practice their own culture, language and spiritual traditions¹⁶. We are also mindful of the potential for the “re-colonization” of our children¹⁷ through exposure, at a very young, impressionable age, to early learning programs that reflect the values and practices of the dominant, mainstream society as part of the “taken for granted” reality in the delivery of early learning and other programs to BC Aboriginal children. In other words, we remain concerned about the persistence of “ideas about the universality of tools and developmental goals”, the absence of longitudinal studies of Aboriginal child cohorts, disaggregated data and “systematic assessments of development conditions or milestones” of Aboriginal child populations, and the continuing application of values, theories, practices, monitoring, screening and diagnostic tools, and education/learning approaches that have not yet been “empirically validated for use with Aboriginal children”, and that have been normed on populations other than Aboriginal children and communities, i.e., primarily “English-speaking children of European heritage living in middle-class urban settings”.¹⁸

The importance of a holistic approach is also demonstrated by much research, including BC research data such as the evidence arising from the application of the Early Development Instrument (EDI), BC Atlas of Child Development, which reveals that BC Aboriginal children are the most vulnerable of all BC children risk across the EDI’s five developmental sub-scales, i.e., physical, social, emotional, language-cognitive, and general knowledge-communication. Although the data is limited in that it does not isolate for Aboriginal child development values or consider the cultural, language or spiritual needs of Aboriginal children, it does, however, make explicit connections between the low socio-economic status (SES) of communities with high proportion of Aboriginal children and those children’s developmental vulnerability.¹⁹

¹⁵ “Global Children in the Shadow of the Global Child” by Alan Pence and Hollie Hix-Small.

¹⁶ Article 30, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

¹⁷ An Elder’s caution that we don’t bring colonization (i.e., residential school values, practices and abuses) to the “heart” of our Nations, contained within the report “Whispered Gently Through Time: First Nations Quality Child Care – A National Study”, by Margo Greenwood and Perry Shawana, Assembly of First Nations, 2000.

¹⁸ Ball, Jessica; “Promoting Equity and Dignity for Aboriginal Children in Canada”, IRPP Choices, Vol. 1, No.7, June 2008.

¹⁹ Kershaw P, Irwin L, Trafford K, and Hertzman C. (2005), “The British Columbia Atlas of Child Development”, Human Early Learning Partnership. Western Geographical Press, Vol 40, available on-line at <http://ecdportal.help.ubc.ca/bc-atlas-child-development.htm>

Research conducted by the OECD also establishes that early childhood development, care and learning programs cannot, in themselves, sustain healthy child development where conditions of child and family poverty prevail, and that substantive “upstream” initiatives are required, including income transfers to low-income groups and other family supports.²⁰

As such, it is essential that early learning programs offered to Aboriginal children be provided as part of a continuum of comprehensive interventions that are responsive to the child’s developmental environment, including early learning programs that support children’s healthy, holistic development through appropriate responsiveness to the realities of persistent, systemic child and family poverty and the low socio-economic status of their communities. The Early Learning Agency should encourage participation by all Provincial Government Ministries, Federal Government Departments and Municipal Government offices that are relevant to supporting the healthy, holistic development of Aboriginal children within a comprehensive support model.

Given these ongoing concerns, we assert that the proposed enhancement of early learning programs, especially the development of school-based pre-kindergarten programs for 3 to 5 year-olds, be developed with significant caution, mindful of the concerns that we have articulated here, with a clear commitment to honour the spirit and intent of our children’s Article 30 and other UN Convention rights²¹, and through respectful collaboration with Aboriginal parents/families, Elders, ECE educators, child care and special needs service providers and the Leadership, to ensure that such programs meet the early learning needs of children and their families, communities and Nations through the promotion of their healthy, holistic development in the context of their cultures, languages and spiritual traditions.

The enhanced early learning programs should be strongly supportive of the holistic development of the child, supporting physical, cognitive, emotional, social, spiritual, cultural, linguistic, aesthetic, creative and artistic development and environmental/ecological awareness, so that children can learn to understand and speak their own language, sing and drum their own traditional songs, perform their own traditional dances and contribute to making their own dance regalia, practice their own cultural and spiritual traditions, help to protect the natural environment and ecology, eat well, become physically fit and healthy, have good mental health, self-esteem, self-confidence and sense of self-efficacy, develop strong social skills and social competence, including their capacities for enduring friendships based upon mutual respect and care, be able to protect themselves in social relationships and situations, and build a strong solid foundation for excellence in culture, language, sports, art forms, including the performing arts (i.e., drama, singing, drumming and dancing – in both traditional and modern forms).

12. Enhanced early learning programs should be culturally-safe and culture-based.

Enhanced early learning programs should be reflective of traditional cultural worldviews and practices of each child’s family, community and/or Nation concerning child development and child rearing, and should support culture and language immersion

²⁰ “Starting Strong II, Canada Report”, 2006, OECD.

²¹ Including Articles 2, 3, 4, 6, 23, 27, 29, 30 and 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

programs, such as “language nests” that support language development and cultural identity and are modeled after the Maori Kohanga Reo, such as the language nest program at the Splats’in Child Care Centre (Enderby, BC).

13. Enhanced early learning programs should be “place-based”.

Enhanced early learning programs should be strongly attached to “place”, with an effective environmental/ecological awareness component and outdoor programming, inclusive of sites significant to First Nations, such as historic trails and sacred places, and traditional economic activities specific to each “place”, i.e., salmon fishing and preparation, gathering (i.e., berries, plants, shellfish, etc.), with strong gardening, diet and meal planning, and food preparation components to facilitate the production and consumption of healthy, locally produced food, where children can begin to learn to grow, prepare and consume their own foods.

14. Enhanced early learning programs must be of high quality and culturally-safe.

Aspects of quality that should be considered include an appropriate staff/student ratio, class size, curricula and qualified staff. Programs should be delivered by qualified/certified - preferably Aboriginal and preferably from the community or Nation being served - caregivers/educators, along with knowledgeable and creditable Aboriginal Elders and other cultural advisors to teach language and culture, according to the children’s cultural identity, i.e., programs should be specific to the child’s Nation and culture, not “pan-Aboriginal or pan-First Nation”.

15. Labour force development.

The Early Learning Agency should consult and collaborate with post-secondary teacher and Early Childhood Educator (ECE) preparation programs, schools boards, unions representing teachers and ECE Educators, BC First Nations schools, communities and associations (First Nations Education Steering Committee and the First Nations School Council), First Nations child care and early learning programs, BC ACCS and other Aboriginal programs and services providing ECD and special needs programs and services, regarding the development of the labour force for the enhanced early learning programs under consideration to ensure that program staff have the necessary qualifications (knowledge, skills and certifications) to deliver high quality programs. Additionally, the existing BC Early Learning Framework (BC ELF) training - currently being delivered by the BC ELF Implementation Project team led by consortium of post-secondary BC ECE educators - should be expanded to train additional Aboriginal Field Leaders to support the universal availability of the training in rural, remote and urban, on-reserve and off-reserve Aboriginal communities.

16. Labour force recruitment and retention strategy.

The Early Learning Agency should also consult and collaborate with Aboriginal communities, ECE educators, child care and development service providers, schools and education associations, including BC ACCS, the First Nations Education Steering

Committee and the First Nations School Council, on the design and implementation of an Aboriginal-specific labour force recruitment and retention strategy to ensure the availability and stability of staff for the enhanced early learning program.

17. Elder involvement.

Regardless of whether the new early learning programs are established in community-based locations or in schools, all facilities should be “Elder-friendly” (i.e., designed to ensure the physical and emotional comfort of participating Elders), and set up to enable children to come into the Elders’ space rather than vice versa. In every case, children should be taught how to interact respectfully with Elders.

18. Parental/family involvement.

Programs should have a welcoming atmosphere and promote/support the involvement of parents/families, including Elders/grandparents and older siblings where possible, and provide opportunities for learning through observation and modeling. Parents/families should feel welcome to participate in their child’s activities/space and should also have access to their own space and opportunities to expand their own learning according to a holistic and culturally-appropriate learning model based on observation and modeling, i.e. access to their own space would provide parents/families with opportunities to interact with and learn from Elders/grandparents and other parents/families. The involvement of Elders/grandparents and healthy parents/families can provide important opportunities for modeling healthy relationships and parenting, which is important because many parents lacked those models in their own childhoods because of removal from their families as a result of residential schools, foster care and youth justice systems, the inter-generational reproduction of family dysfunction, and, in some cases, undiagnosed parental Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD).

19. Inclusive of children with additional support needs (i.e., special needs).

The enhanced early learning programs should serve all children, including children with additional needs for support (i.e., special needs) and should ensure that there is adequate and appropriately qualified support staff to ensure the effective participation of the special needs child and to maintain quality for the other children participating in the programs. Depending upon the geographical location of programs, relationships should be established with local resources to develop innovative ways of promoting the holistic development of children with additional support needs; therapeutic horseback riding programs developed with local stables is one example of a new therapeutic resource that is generally not available to Aboriginal children with additional support needs, that could be accessed through innovative partnerships with community resources, where available. Programs should ensure that the life long needs of children with FASD are addressed, including the development of individualized support plans consistent with the child’s unique needs for support. Special needs support services should be provided directly or through referral to other community and/or specialized resources.

20. Universal developmental assessments.

Programs should ensure that effective, culturally-safe developmental assessments are implemented for all children entering programs; and individualized learning plans should be designed for each child, responsive to the findings of such developmental

assessments. Any “special needs” should be accommodated within those individualized plans, such as the child’s needs for speech and language therapy and FASD support

21. Monitoring and documentation.

The progress of every child in an early learning program should be monitored and documented regularly; innovative forms of documentation should be explored, such as those in use in Reggio Emilia and/or New Zealand programs. Data should be disaggregated and reported for First Nations, Inuit and Métis children. The provision of disaggregated First Nations-specific data is consistent with the Transformative Change Accord between the BC Government and BC First Nations. The Administrative Data Development Project, an initiative of the Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation (MARR) should facilitate the provision of disaggregated data for programs and services provided to Aboriginal children.

22. “Seamless day”.

As noted elsewhere, enhanced early learning programs, regardless of location in school or community settings, should provide a “seamless day” for children requiring both “early learning / education” and “care”, including integration with after-school programs, especially where the child has older siblings attending such programs. Seamless day programs integrate “care” and “education” into one program, which is offered at one location for the entire day.

23. Transportation services.

Programs should provide transportation services (pick-up and return), where needed, available to both children and their parents/families. In many cases, the provision of transportation to and from programs is a deciding factor as to whether parents/families will access voluntary programs such as early learning and/or pre-kindergarten.

24. Provision of snacks and hot meals.

Programs should provide both snacks and hot meals for children and for their parents/families when they participate in the program. Providing nutritious snacks and hot meals is an important support, given the high rates of child and family poverty in Aboriginal communities. Along with the provision of transportation, the provision of snacks, lunches and hot meals can be a deciding factor as to whether parents/families will access voluntary programs.

25. Clothing and equipment exchange.

Programs should provide space where clothing and other items for children and/or families could be donated and exchanged; this is an important support for families challenged by low-incomes.

26. Referral and access.

Programs should have the capacity to refer children and their parents/families, where necessary, to other community services and/or professional, medical and/or specialist diagnostic and treatment services. Programs should monitor any referrals that they make

to ensure follow-up and provide any advocacy that may be necessary with any service delivery system.

Next Steps

BC ACCS recommends that the Early Learning Agency act expeditiously to create collaborative working relationships with Aboriginal communities – including early childhood and school age child care, early childhood development, early learning, special needs, child health and other relevant programs and services serving Aboriginal children including BC ACCS, First Nations schools and education associations, including the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) and the First Nations School Council (FNSC), public schools and other public programs serving Aboriginal children, for the purpose of building consensus on the expansion of early learning programs for First Nations and other Aboriginal children, according to the recommendations contained within this submission. The First Nations ECD Council will be an important partner in this initiative. BC ACCS is committed to working with the Early Learning Agency to support the expansion of early learning programs that will meet the needs of all BC Aboriginal children for early learning and holistic development.

Response Form: Part Two

Please provide the following information about yourself and/or your organization. This will help ensure that the government hears from a wide range of individuals and groups.

To help us understand your perspective on the issues, please check the box that best describes you.

I am responding on behalf of an organization.

If you checked the last box, please provide the name of your organization:

BC Aboriginal Child Care Society (BC ACCS)

You do not have to provide your name, but you may do so if you wish:

Karen Isaac, Executive Director, BC ACCS

Please submit your comments by July 18, 2008.

Submitted on August 15th via e-mail to: EDUC.earlylearning@gov.bc.ca